

What the municipal elections in France told us about the future of the French party system



After a lengthy delay due to Covid-19, France held the second round of its municipal elections on 28 June. [Ben Margulies](#) assesses what the results might mean for the French party system. He writes that the successes of the mainstream centre-left in major cities, and the resilience of the old mainstream parties, suggest that Emmanuel Macron has failed to bring the urban electorate together in a firm coalition.

France belatedly held the second round of its 2020 municipal elections on 28 June, after a three-month delay imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. These unusual circumstances may make it hard to draw any general conclusions from the results, especially since they may have contributed to unusually low turnout: [Le Monde reported that](#) only 41.6 percent of voters attended polling stations on the day of the election. Nevertheless, polling results in the country's largest cities do suggest that the French party system remains in flux, and that the traditional centre-left, which imploded only three years ago, might yet stage a comeback in a different form.

President Emmanuel Macron's centrist party, *La République en marche* (LREM), was never expected to do especially well in the elections; incumbents do poorly in midterm elections, and LREM lacks a dense network of party structures at the local level. The party won a majority in the National Assembly in 2017, but this was mainly because French voters tend to give the President a majority in legislative elections, which follow the presidential contest. Since then, LREM [has suffered the defection](#) of more than two dozen of its deputies, and now relies on allied centrists to keep its parliamentary majority. In the municipal elections, LREM often allied with the centre-right *Républicains* (for example, in Lyon).

However, LREM did have some assets going into the polls. In the first round of the 2017 presidential elections, Macron [scored above his average in larger cities in general](#). LREM also did well in big cities during the [2017 legislative elections](#); the party and its allies won 13 of Paris's 18 seats, nine of the 10 seats in the Haute-Garonne department (home of Toulouse), and 12 of the 14 in Rhône (home of Lyon).

But LREM suffered an embarrassing defeat. In Paris, Poitiers, Brest and Lille, where the party ran candidates on its own, [it came in third](#). In Lyon, despite an alliance with the centre-right and the city's long-time mayor as its candidate, LREM also lost; another LREM-*Républicain* alliance lost in Strasbourg. Among France's [largest cities](#), the President's party won only Le Havre, where Prime Minister Edouard Philippe carried the day, and Amiens, which happens to be Macron's hometown; a LREM-*Républicain* candidate won in Toulouse.



Emmanuel Macron, Credit: [CC BY-NC-ND © ALDE Party](#)

In the larger cities, the key winners were instead the centre-left parties so brutally cast aside in 2017. The *Parti socialiste*, reduced to single digits in the 2017 presidential election and fewer than 30 members of the National Assembly, led a left-wing alliance to victory in [Paris](#) by a 16-point margin over the *Républicain* candidate (LREM's candidate, the former health minister, won about 13 percent). PS-led left-wing coalitions won re-election in Nantes, Rouen and Rennes, and took control of Nancy. The Green party (formally, *Europe Écologie–Les Verts*) provided the winning coalition candidates in Bordeaux, Annecy, Grenoble and Marseille (though the left [will not have](#) an absolute majority in the Marseille city council).

Where the left wing failed to settle on a single candidacy in the second round, it was notable that the Greens prevailed in some key contests, such as Strasbourg. The Greens came within 227 votes of unseating Martine Aubry, mayor of Lille for nearly 20 years. On the other hand, Socialists beat Greens in Dijon and Avignon.

Meanwhile, the *Rassemblement National*, formerly the *Front National*, scored one major win, with Louis Aliot taking Perpignan. Far-right mayors also easily won re-election in smaller bastions, like Fréjus and Henin-Beaumont. However, the party did poorly in Marseille, where it lost the mayoralty of one of the city's eight *secteurs*, and [lost hundreds](#) of municipal-council seats overall. Meanwhile, the *Républicains* and their allies held Toulouse and Nice and gained Lorient and did well in smaller municipalities.

What do the victories of the centre-left tell us about the possible fate of the French party system? Again, the second round of the municipal election is just one data point in a rather strange and frightening year. But the successes of the mainstream centre-left in the major cities, and the resilience of the old mainstream parties, suggest that LREM has failed to encapsulate the urban electorate in a firm coalition. This suggests that the *Parti socialiste*, EE-LV and the *Républicains* have room for a comeback. The results also suggest something of a rearrangement of forces on the centre-left, where the Socialists were the dominant force from the 1970s to 2017. The EE-LV [polled more than](#) twice the votes the Socialist list did in the 2019 European elections; it may be that the centre-left, if it revives, may do so with a more powerful Green party and a relatively weaker Socialist party, [a trend observable](#) in other European countries.

Macron often described modern politics as a division between those with “open” (that is, socially and economically liberal) stances, and those with closed (nationalist, protectionist or conservative) stances. The 2017 presidential election tended to conform to this narrative, counterpoising Macron with Marine Le Pen's *Front National* candidacy. The 2019 European elections, when the by then *Rassemblement National* and LREM came in first and second, suggested that this open-closed cleavage had continued to entrench itself.

A [study](#) by Florent Gougou and Simon Persico found that French voters really did group on a closed-open cleavage in the 2017 elections, as well as on an economic-environmental one. On the closed-open cleavage, one found Macron's voters, alongside voters for the Socialist and *La France Insoumise* candidates. At the same time, Gougou and Persico found another division, between economic liberals and more interventionists; the latter were also more concerned with the environment.

If LREM and Macron have failed to root themselves in the French electorate, that would leave room for another socially liberal, cosmopolitan alternative. The Socialists and EE-LV could easily take that role, especially since they had already been acting as parties of the cosmopolitan left before Macron came along. Because these parties also differ with Macron's camp on economic and environmental issues, they can distinguish themselves from Macron's LREM even as they displace it.

Although the municipal election results hint that this is a possibility, it is no more than this. The Green and Socialist surge is mostly limited to large cities, which – though vital to Macron's success – are hardly all of France. High abstention and the tendency of voters to register anti-incumbency protests at municipal polls limit the predictive value of municipal elections. Perhaps the 2021 regional elections can confirm a trend. However, one thing we can say is that if the old centre-left does make a comeback in 2022, it will at least have a deep bench of mayors available as potential candidates for the Élysée.

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